



State of Connecticut
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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PUBLIC HEALTH COMMITTEE

March 14, 2012

To Chairs Coleman and Fox, ranking members, and members of the
Judiciary Committee

My name is Charlie Stallworth, state representative, serving the 126th
District, Bridgeport.

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today. I am here to
speak in support of SB 280. I believe the death penalty in the State of
Connecticut should be repealed.

Prior to serving our state and my district, I have served as a pastor of a
church in Bridgeport and as an adjunct professor at Hartford Seminary. I
have been in ministry for the past 32 years and have taught on the
seminary level for the past ten years. Therefore, one might believe my
approach to this matter and my appearance before you would be strictly
religious, resting on the tenants of theology and morality. Though I have
strong theological and moral beliefs that guide my life and my capital
punishment, my purpose here today goes far beyond. In other words, I
did not come to preach to you today but speak with just as much passion
and purpose.

The death penalty in Connecticut is an inherently flawed law that should be repealed.

We have seen over and over again the many mistakes made in the application of the death penalty. Sometimes we get the wrong person. Even more horrifying is when a person who has been executed has subsequently been found to have been innocent. Across the country 140 innocent persons have been freed from death rows. There could be a number of reasons why someone was wrongly convicted, such as, mistaken identification, bad police work, and so forth. Over twenty years ago, I attended a seminary with a young man who had spent 27 years in prison, before being freed for a crime he did not commit. I talked with him daily and was often moved by his faith and determination. Yet, in the back of my mind I always struggled with the thought of how we could get it so wrong, while being a thoughtful, intelligent, and good willed society. Our society is better. We are better!

But just getting it wrong is not the only problem. The way in which we select who lives and who dies in Connecticut is another flawed aspect of the death penalty's application. An extremely thorough report by Professor John Donohue of Stanford Law School examined all the murders in Connecticut over the last thirty years and concluded that our state's death penalty is applied in a racist manner.

When all other factors are accounted for, the race of the defendant and the race of the victim are strong determinants as to whether or not the state will seek the death penalty. Professor Donohue's study concluded that a defendant is 6 times more likely to be sentenced to death in Connecticut if the defendant is a minority and his victim was Caucasian. This is a deadly racial bias. In other words, my brothers, my sons, and many of my friends are more likely to get the death penalty, even if they arrested the wrong person, than many of you. And the reason is skin color!

My father served this country in the military, retired and then made Civil Rights his issue. I often attended meetings with him and because of that I have been fighting for civil rights my entire ministry and I know the death penalty is an important civil rights issue in our time. One theologian has put methods of capital punishment, the cross, and the noose in the same category and I believe he is on point!

I have no doubt that generations to come will look back at us and question how we could for so long condone a punishment so unfairly handed out.

On August 30th of last year my five year old granddaughter was killed in a car accident caused by a senseless person travelling at 80 miles an hour, hitting her mother's car that had stopped for another accident. I often wonder as I think about the death penalty that if the circumstances of my granddaughter's death had been different and the context had been one in which the one that caused her death would be a potential death row inmate would my beliefs change. My answer each time I consider it is no. Dr. King interpreted a passage of religious text in his life-time to suggest if we keep acting on an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we will only become a blind and toothless society.

In closing, I am before you not just as a religious leader, seminary professor and colleague representing Bridgeport, but also as an African American, a person who knows what it is to lose a precious life by someone else not appreciating life, and as a fellow human being asking you to do what is morally right.

I ask you to please do everything in your power to ensure that the death penalty in the State of Connecticut is repealed this year. Thank you for your time and consideration.